



A Dark Side of Computing and Information Sciences: Characteristics of Online Groomers

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ABSTRACT

The European Online Grooming Project from 2009 to 2011 involved researchers from Norway, Italy, Belgium and the UK. The project had three separate but interlinked phases. The first was a scoping project. The second and third phases involved interviews with convicted online groomers across Europe and dissemination activity respectively. The key features of grooming behavior the study identified do not apply to all groomers in all contacts they have with young people. These features of online grooming include factors that help maintain the behavior such as the online environment, dissonance and offenders perceptions of young people and their behavior. The research also identified salient behaviors in the grooming process such as: scanning the online environment for potential people to contact, the identity adopted by the groomer (be it their own or another); the nature of contact with the young person; the different ways in which the online groomer can intensify the process of grooming and the diverse range of outcomes toward the end of the process. In particular, it is clear from the research that not all episodes of online grooming result in a physical meeting. The first 'type' of groomer identified is the *distorted attachment* offender. Men in this group had offence supportive beliefs that involved seeing contact with the young person as a 'relationship'. The second type is the *adaptable online groomer*. This group of men had offence supportive beliefs that involved their own needs and seeing the victim as mature and capable. Finally, the *hyper-sexualized* group of men was characterized by extensive indecent image collections of children and significant online contact with other sexual offenders or offender groups.

Keywords: *online grooming, interviews, sexual offender, relationships, pedophile.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The sexual abuse of young people via the Internet is an international problem, a crime without geographical boundaries. Adults use the Internet to befriend and establish an emotional connection with a child, in order to entice them into meeting. As more young people use the Internet to socially network with friends, the potential for contact with sexual offenders increases. There is, however, limited information available about the behaviors of Internet sexual offenders to inform effective risk management strategies for policy makers, law enforcement agencies, parents, and young people. In response to this, the European Commission Safer Internet Plus Program commissioned a consortium of leading experts from the UK and across Europe to develop an understanding of the different ways in which sexual offenders approach, communicate and 'groom' young people online. This paper reports findings from the European project based on interviews of both experts and offenders in the UK, Belgium, Italy, and Norway.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Men who target young people online for sex are pedophiles [10, 17]. According to Dunaigre [9], the pedophile is an emblematic figure, made into a caricature and imbued with all the fears, anxieties and apprehensions rocking our society today. Pedophile acts are - according to the World Health Organization (WHO) - sexual behavior

that an adult major (16 years or over), overwhelmingly of the male sex, acts out towards prepubescent children (13 years or under). According to the WHO, there must normally be a five-year age difference between the two, except in the case of pedophilic practices at the end of adolescence where what counts is more the difference in sexual maturity. However, the definition of criminal behavior varies among countries. For example, pedophile acts in Norway are sexual behavior that a person acts out towards children of 16 years or under. There is no minimum age definition for the grooming person in Norwegian criminal law, but age difference and difference in sexual maturity is included as criteria for criminal liability.

According to Davidson and Martellozzo [7: 277], Internet sex offender behavior can include: "the construction of sites to be used for the exchange of information, experiences, and indecent images of children; the organization of criminal activities that seek to use children for prostitution purposes and that produce indecent images of children at a professional level; the organization of criminal activities that promote sexual tourism".

Child grooming is a process that commences with sexual predators choosing a target area that is likely to attract children. In the physical world, this could be venues visited by children such as schools, shopping malls, training facilities or playgrounds. A process of grooming then commences when offenders take a particular interest in the child and make them feel special with the intention of



forming a bond. The Internet has greatly facilitated this process in the virtual world. Offenders now seek out their victims by visiting Internet relay chat (IRC) rooms from their home or Internet cafés at any time. Once a child victim is identified, the offender can invite it into a private area of the IRC to engage in private conversations on intimate personal details including the predator's sex life.

The Internet is an international network of networks that connects people all over the world. Any computer and mobile phone can communicate with almost any other computer and mobile phone linked to the Internet. The Internet has created a universal technology platform on which to build all sorts of new products, services, communities and solutions. It is reshaping the way information technology is used by individuals and organizations. The Internet has provided an expedient mode of communication and access to a wealth of information [8].

In less than two decades, the Internet has moved from a strange communications medium to an obvious tool in our homes, schools, workplaces and travels. It enables us to search information, perform routine tasks and communicate with others. The technological aspects of the Internet are developing at the same high speed as the number of users globally. The Internet provides a social context for us to meet with others and to exchange information [12].

The World Wide Web is a system with universally accepted standards for storing, retrieving, formatting, changing and displaying information in a networked environment. Information is stored and displayed as electronic pages that can contain numbers, text, pictures, graphics, sound and video. These web pages can be linked electronically to other Web pages, independent of where they are located.

In a survey of young people in Norway between the ages 8 and 18 years old, 78 percent of the respondents said that they are involved in chatting. The use of chatting for communication is more common than the use of e-mail in this age group. In the age group 17-18 years old, all respondents said they do chatting. The percentage reporting that they have been plagued while chatting was 9 percent. Among chatters about one third has met persons in reality that they first met while chatting (Medietilsynet, 2008).

The Internet is a valuable tool; however, it can also be detrimental to the wellbeing of children due to numerous online hazards [8: 153]:

There is the potential for children to be abused via cyberspace through online sexual solicitation and access to pornography. Indeed, the Internet is replete with inappropriate material, including pornography, chat rooms with adult themes and access to instant messaging wherein others could misrepresent them selves. Because children are actively utilizing the Internet where unknown others can have access to them or where they can be exposed to inappropriate sexual materials, they require safeguarding and education in safe Internet use.

Online grooming might be compared to online learning and other forms of online activity. The purpose of such analogies is to identify both similarities and differences. Learning on the Internet, for example, is structured as a formal and non-anonymous activity. To some

it is scary rather than safe, because students are asked to expose their (lack of) knowledge on the Internet and share it with others. Active and extrovert students enjoy this, while other students choose to be passive on-lookers.

Generally, going online enables individuals to play a personality role, which might be more or less different from their real personality. There will always be a difference between your role in virtual reality and in real world. We play roles as adults and parents, or children and students, both in the real world and in virtual realities. However, in the virtual world we may find it easier to live our dreams and fantasies. In the type "second life" environments on the Internet, people tend to be unfaithful and to build their dream existence alone or with others.

3. INTERNET CHARACTERISTICS

What is then so special about being online? One answer to this question is that you can be in a different, informal and anonymous setting to live out dreams and fantasies. We are all familiar with online services on the Internet. A typical example is online banking, where we complete our payments of bills at home. Most Norwegians have many years of personal experience using online services on the Internet. According to the United Nations [14], Norway is ranked third in the world in terms of online services provided by the government. Sweden and Denmark are on the top of the list, and Norway is followed by the United States and the Netherlands. The United Kingdom is ranked tenth on the list.

A number of characteristics of the Internet for online services has been observed, which may shed light on methods offenders use to groom children:

1. *Disconnected personal communication.* While communication on the Internet might be personal in content, it is not perceived as interpersonal in meaning. A typical example is e-mail, where the sender might feel completely disconnected from the time and place the receiver reads the e-mail message. Even when chatting in real time, sender and receiver may perceive both involvement and disconnectedness at the same time. Some change their personality unconsciously when moving from face-to-face communication to e-mail communication [15]. Internet grooming can be and often is different from 'real world' grooming in that offenders spend little time chatting and will come straight to the point, sometimes instantly, e.g. 'would you like to meet for sex'. This would suggest that the Internet might act to remove inhibitions associated with face-to-face contact, which can be explained by the disconnected nature of personal communication on the Internet, thereby avoiding unpleasant emotional states [12].
2. *Mediating technology.* Internet is a mediating technology that interconnects parties that are independent or want to be [1]. The interconnections can be business-to-business (B2B), business-to-consumer (B2C), government-to-business (G2B), person-to-person (P2P) or any other link between individuals and organizations. In the case of grooming, Internet serves



- as a mediating technology mainly for person-to-person (P2P) communication, but person-to-group (P2G) and group-to-person (G2P) do also occur.
3. *Universality.* Universality of the Internet refers to the Internet's ability to both enlarge and shrink the world. It enlarges the world because anyone anywhere in the world can potentially make his or her services, messages and requests available to anyone anywhere else in the world anytime. It shrinks the world in that distance is reduced on electronic highways (Afuah and Tucci, 2003). In the case of grooming, Internet enables each grooming individual to potentially contact anyone, anywhere and anytime. Contact is established without the groomer having to travel physically, all he needs to do is to travel electronically. The Internet combines global communications with an incredible range of resources [3].
 4. *Network externalities.* A technology or product exhibits network externalities when it becomes more valuable to users as more people take advantage of it. A classic example is the first person in Norway who got himself a telephone. Until a second person got a telephone, there was nobody in Norway to talk to on the phone. The value of the telephone for each subscriber increases with the number of subscribers. Similarly, the value of the Internet increases with the number of Internet users. The more people that are connected to a network within the Internet, the more valuable the network is to each user [1]. The more children that are connected to a network, the more valuable the network is to each groomer, since he is able to reach and get in contact with more potential victims. Since Internet access is found in more and more homes all over the world [12], the number of potential victims rises accordingly.
 5. *Distribution channel.* The Internet acts as a distribution channel for products that are information bits, such as software, music, video, news, tickets and money. There is a replacement effect if the Internet is used to serve the same deliveries, which were serviced by the old physical distribution channel. There is an extension effect if the Internet is used by more people and for new services [1]. When grooming children, the offender may use the Internet not only for communications. He can also use it to send gifts and other digital items that the child might be interested in. He can also send digital items that the child is not always interested in, such as pornographic pictures and videos to test reactions.
 6. *Time moderator.* The Internet has an ability to shrink and enlarge time. It shrinks time for people who want information when information sources are closed. It enlarges time when related work can be done at different points in time [1]. Both dimensions of the Internet as a time moderator can be important in online victimization of children. When a child is offline, the groomer can leave messages and gifts for the child to pick up next time the child logs on.
 7. *Low cost standard.* Individuals could not exploit the properties of the Internet if they adopt it. For two reasons, adoption has been easy. First and foremost important, the Internet and the web application are standards open to everyone and are very easy to use. Second, the cost of the Internet is a lot lower than that of earlier means of electronic communication [1]. Given the low cost standard, access to the Internet is not limited to affluent or well-educated people. Both adults and children have access independent of social class in most countries. For a groomer, this enables access not only to a large number of children but also to a large variety of children.
 8. *Electronic double.* It is not the real person who is present on the Internet. It is a digital copy of the person who is present. The digital information about the person creates an image of the person, which we call the electronic double. Everyone has his or her electronic double in government systems, for example, where my double causes taxes. If information about me is wrong, then my double will cause wrong taxes for me to pay. Even if I am honest and try to provide as much relevant information about myself as possible, my electronic double will be perceived as different from my real self. How a pedophile man is perceived by a child on the Internet, is thus dependent both on the information the man provides and the image this information creates in the head of the child. Even if the man is completely honest in all communication with the child, the child may perceive the man as very different from reality and maybe similar to someone the child already knows. Also the man may perceive the child and create an electronic double of the child in his head, which can be far away from reality.
 9. *Electronic double manipulation.* The electronic double created on the Internet represents an image of the real person. The real person can change his or her electronic double and make it more or less similar to the real self. The most obvious change is age, where a grooming man may claim to be younger than he actually is. This requires consistency in all other information, so that the presented age matches other information about the person. Similarly, children may claim to be older than they actually are.
 10. *Information asymmetry.* Information asymmetry is often reduced on the Internet. An information asymmetry exists when one party to a transaction has information that another party does not - information that is important to the transaction. The World Wide Web reduces such information asymmetries, as the other party can find the same information on the web [1]. Neither the man nor the child has information monopoly in areas where information is available on the World Wide Web.
 11. *Infinite virtual capacity.* Access to the Internet is perceived as unlimited; you do not have to wait on hold or in a long line. For example, virtual communities like chat houses have infinite capacity for members who can talk anytime of the day for as long as they want [1].
 12. *Independence in time and space.* While a traditional meeting requires that participants are present at the same place at the same time, meeting on the Internet is possible even if different participants are present at different places at different times. The online



<http://www.cisjournal.org>

environment enables access to a wealth of information and communication across both distance and time [10]. The independence in time and space is typically the case when using e-mail. When participating in a chat room, participants are required to respond within a short time frame, eliminating independence in time, but still keeping independence in space. On the mobile phone, SMS messages have the same characteristic of independence in time and space. The Internet promotes better social relationships, as people will be freed from the constraints of time and place [10].

13. *Cyberspace*. Using the Internet is not just a supplement to or add-on to real life. It is also an enabler of an alternative life style in cyberspace with its own cyber culture. Cyberspace is an abstract space, rather than a physical space, where a culture has emerged from the use of computer networks for communication, entertainment and business. Cyber culture can for example be found in virtual communities, which is a group of people that primarily interact via communication media such as newsletters, telephone, e-mail or instant messages rather than face to face for social and other purposes [16]. In terms of online grooming, both adults and children are sometimes members of virtual communities. Calder [3] argues that there are many benefits that can be derived from the development of online relationships and online relationships that become sexual in cyberspace. Cyberspace can facilitate the formation of romantic relationships, improve the chances of finding an "optimal" partner, highlight that relationships can develop on attachments, and improve one's skills in interpersonal, yet virtual, communication.

14. *Dynamic social network*. The emergence of social network services has radically challenged our understanding of traditional, territorial social networks. An average Westerner's social network comprises about 150 individuals. Once a physical social network is established, this number of members tends to change little over time, and the members themselves do not change very much. In contrast, the Internet enables individuals to expand and reduce their social network and replace members in the network [2]. The Internet provides a social context for more and more people to meet more and more people [12]. There is a dynamic social network rather than a stable social network on the Internet. When both offenders and potential victims dynamically change their social networks, the likelihood of contact increases.

The Internet is a special artifact system that has enormous technical and social positive impacts on modern society [10: 41]:

The online environment enables access to a wealth of information and communication across both distance and time. There is a vast amount of data available on virtually every subject, making it an effective learning tool.

However, the Internet is also a double-edged sword with negative and positive consequences (Kierkegaard, 2008: 41):

It has a potential for misuse and has generated societal concerns. Today, the danger for children is even greater because the Internet provides anonymity to predators.

Recent advances in computer technology have been aiding sexual predators, stalkers, child pornographers, child traffickers, and others with the intent of exploiting children. While they have existed prior to the Internet, the advent of the new technology two decades ago has allowed for easier and faster distribution of pornographic materials and communication across national and international boundaries [10].

On the other hand, the Internet is not all negative concerning sexual communication [3: 3]:

It can be used for healthy sexual expression. For example, the Internet offers the opportunity for the formulation of online or virtual communities where isolated or disenfranchised individuals e.g. gay males and lesbians can communicate with each other around sexual topics of shared interest; it offers educational potential; and it may allow for sexual experimentation in a safer forum, thus facilitating identity exploration and development.

The Internet allows pedophiles instant access to other predators worldwide, open discussion of their sexual desires, shared ideas about ways to lure victims, mutual support of their adult-child sex philosophies, instant access to potential child victims worldwide, disguised identities for approaching children, even to the point of presenting as a member of teen groups. Furthermore, the Internet allows pedophiles ready access to chat rooms reserved for teenagers and children to find out how and who to target as potential victims, the Internet provides means to identify and track down home contact information, and the Internet enables adults to build long-term virtual relationships with potential victims, prior to attempting to engage the child in physical contact.

Relationships are built using social software. Through the Internet, people are discovering and inventing new ways to share knowledge and interests. People communicate on the Internet with each other in a human voice. These conversations using social software are collectively referred to as social media, a wide-ranging term that encompasses the practice and resulting output of all kinds of information created online by those who were previously consumers of that media [4: 7]:

Philosophically, social media describes the way in which content (particularly news and opinion) has become democratized by the Internet and the role people now play not only in consuming information and conveying it to others, but also in creating and sharing content with them, be it textual, aural or visual.

For this reason, social media is interchangeably referred to as consumer- or user-generated content. Social media is often defined by the categories of software tools that people use to undertake this consuming, conveying, creating and sharing content with each other, including blogs, podcasts, wikis and social networking that have found their place on the Internet [4].

Blogs in terms of online personal journals is one of the examples mentioned by Cook [4], and Mitchell et al. [11] phrased the following question: Are blogs putting youth



at risk for online sexual solicitation or harassment? They conducted a telephone survey of 1,500 youth Internet users, ages 10-17, in the USA. They found that 16 percent of youth Internet users reported blogging in the past year. Teenagers and girls were the most common bloggers, and bloggers were more likely than other youth to post personal information online.

However, Mitchell et al. [11] found that bloggers were not more likely to interact with people they met online and did not know in person. Youth who interacted with people they met online, regardless of whether or not they blogged, had higher odds of receiving online sexual solicitations. Bloggers who did not interact with people they met online were at no increased risk for sexual solicitation. Moreover, posting personal information did not add to risk. The only difference found was related to harassment, since youthful bloggers were found to be at increased risk for online harassment, regardless of whether they also interacted with others online.

4. EUROPEAN PROJECT

The European Online Grooming Project from 2009 to 2011 involves researchers from Norway, Italy, Belgium and the UK. The project had three separate but interlinked phases. The first was a scoping project. The second and third phases involved interviews with convicted online groomers across Europe and dissemination activity respectively. The research had the following overarching objectives:

- describe the behavior of both offenders who groom and young people who are 'groomed' and explore differences within each group and how these differences may have a bearing on offence outcome,
- describe how information and communication technology is used to facilitate the process of online grooming,
- further the current low knowledge base about the way in which young people are selected and prepared for abuse online,
- make a significant contribution to the development of educational awareness and preventative initiatives aimed at parents and young people,

To meet this set of objectives, the project involved three separate but inter-linked phases. First, a scoping phase that encompassed a review of recent police case files as well as interviews with key stakeholders working to prevent online grooming and a literature review. Next, in-depth interviews with men who have been convicted of online grooming in each consortium country was also complete. These research interviews investigated in detail the behavior of Internet sexual offenders and described the variation in their actions according to the characteristics and response of different young people. This paper provides an overview of our phase two findings.

5. RESEARCH FINDINGS

The first step in developing a robust understanding of online grooming was to assess the hypothetical model developed in the scoping phase. Thematic analysis of

offender interviews indicated that some refinement was necessary to reflect the complexity of online grooming. The first high level refinement was to rename the model as 'features of online grooming'. There were two reasons for this: first, 'model' assumes a linear pathway through phases – our interviews with online groomers showed this is not the case. Online groomers enter and exit particular phases according to their objectives and the perceived 'needs' of the young people targeted. Second, the word model assumes that all aspects of the described process are relevant to the population of groomers. Again, our research indicates this not to be the case. That is, although some groomers described taking a measured and lengthy approach through a sequence of pre-determined steps, there was also evidence of fast and almost random approaches to young people. In the section below, we briefly describe our typology of online grooming that explains these diverse offending behaviors.

As noted above, the key features of grooming behavior the study identified do not apply to all groomers in all contacts they have with young people. These features of online grooming include factors that help maintain the behavior such as the online environment, dissonance and offenders perceptions of young people and their behavior. The research also identified salient behaviors in the grooming process such as: scanning the online environment for potential people to contact, the identity adopted by the groomer (be it their own or another); the nature of contact with the young person; the different ways in which the online groomer can intensify the process of grooming and the diverse range of outcomes toward the end of the process. In particular, it is clear from the research that not all episodes of online grooming result in a physical meeting. Development of the thematic framework was followed by detailed within and between case analysis to identify and understand associations between broad grooming features and individual offender characteristics. These analyses led to the development of a classification that encompassed three types of online groomer across nine behavioral dimensions. These analytical dimensions included whether the offender: had any previous convictions for sexual offending; used their own or another identity; the nature and extent of indecent image use; contacted other offenders online; the type of offence-supportive beliefs described; the speed of contact made with young people; how contact was made and sustained; and finally, the outcome of the offence (online offending and/or offline meeting).

The first 'type' of groomer identified is the **distorted attachment** offender. Men in this group had offence supportive beliefs that involved seeing contact with the young person as a '*relationship*'. As such, they did not get involved in other online behaviours that indicated to them, and others, that they were sexually offending. Men within this group did not have any indecent images of children and they did not have any contact with any other sexual offenders online. This group also seemed to spend a significant amount of time online talking to the young person before they met the victim. All men in this group went on to meet the victim to develop or further the '*relationship*'.



Social relation theory can be applied to explain this behaviour. A social relation expresses itself in social interaction between two or more individuals. Social bonding occurs when belief, attachment, commitment and involvement become characteristics of the relationship.

The second type is the **adaptable online groomer**. This group of men had offence supportive beliefs that involved their own needs and seeing the victim as mature and capable. Unlike the group above, they did not seem to have discussed the encounter in terms of a relationship. Some men in this group had collections of indecent images of children but they were not significant collections in terms of size. They also tended not to have significant contact with other sexual offenders online. Men in this group were adept at adopting their identity and grooming style according to how the young person presented online. Similarly, the speed at which contact developed could be fast and/or slow according to the how the victim responded to contact.

Transaction cost theory can be applied to explain this behaviour. A transaction is an agreement, communication, or movement carried out between separate entities or objects, often involving the exchange of items of value, such as information, goods, services, and money. In economics and related disciplines, a transaction cost is a cost incurred in making such exchanges. Transaction costs include search costs, information costs and bargaining costs. Transaction costs tend to increase when transactions are infrequent, when transactions require special issues, and when there is a likelihood of opportunistic behaviour. Thus, an adaptable online groomer will tend to avoid high transaction costs by concentrating on transactions with potential victims where transactions are frequent, they require no special issues, and there is little threat of opportunistic behaviour.

Finally, the **hyper-sexualized** group of men was characterized by extensive indecent image collections of

children and significant online contact with other sexual offenders or offender groups. Some men in this group also had significant collections of extreme adult pornography. They adopted different identities altogether, or had an identity picture that was not of their face but of their genitals. Their contacts with young people were highly sexualized and escalated very quickly. Their offence supportive beliefs involved 'dehumanizing' young people. They tended not to personalize contact and so did not seem to be using the phone or other personal media like the other groups of offenders. This group is so extreme that grooming and groomers sometimes is not really an adequate label for these men. They are not interested in seduction, furthering a relationship or even a discussion in some cases, it is all about their instant needs, and they did not seem to care what the receiver feels. They tend to apply abusive tactics. By advancing the interests of the offender at the expense of the victim, abusive tactics are manipulative, exploitative, devious, and deceptive.

Expectancy violations theory can be applied to explain this behavior. The theory sees communication as the exchange of information that is high in relational content and can be used to violate the expectations of another, who will perceive the exchange either positively or negatively depending on the liking between the two people. Expectancy Violations Theory attempts to explain people's reactions to unexpected behavior. Expectancies are primarily based upon social norms and specific characteristics of the communicators. Violations of expectancies cause arousal and compel the recipient to initiate a series of cognitive appraisals of the violation. The theory proposes that expectancy will influence the outcome of the communication as positive or negative and predicts that positive violations increase the attraction of the violator and negative violations decrease the attraction of the violator.

Groups	RELATION Distorted Attachment Groomer	TRANSACTION Adaptable Groomer	VIOLATION Hyper-Sexualized Groomer
<i>Previous convictions</i>	No	No	Yes
<i>Use of identity</i>	Own	Other	Other
<i>Indecent image use</i>	No	No	Yes
<i>Contact other offenders</i>	No	No	Yes
<i>Offence-supportive belief</i>	Friendship and love	Exchange compliance	Dehumanised as object
<i>Speed of contact</i>	Long before meeting	Tailored escalation	Fast sex talk and action
<i>Contact method</i>	Personalized contact by phone	Contingent contact approach	Non-personal contact approach
<i>Contact maintenance</i>	Persistence of caring and love	Offers of help and services	Threats of punishment
<i>Offence outcome</i>	All want to meet offline	Some want to meet offline	Some want to meet offline

Table 1: Characteristics of three groups of online grooming offenders

While the first group of men might be labeled *relationship-oriented offenders*, the second group is *transaction-oriented offenders*, and the third group is *power-*

oriented offenders. Transactions consist of exchanges of sexual favors as well as exchanges of information and gifts.

By means of manipulating and dehumanizing the child as a victim power is established.

Offenders use a number of networking sites. Social networking sites of all kinds were reported in our interviews.

Responding offenders mentioned coolbox, chat rooms, wap chatrooms, skyblog, faceparty, msn, bebo, high 5, chatavenue, and ladslads.

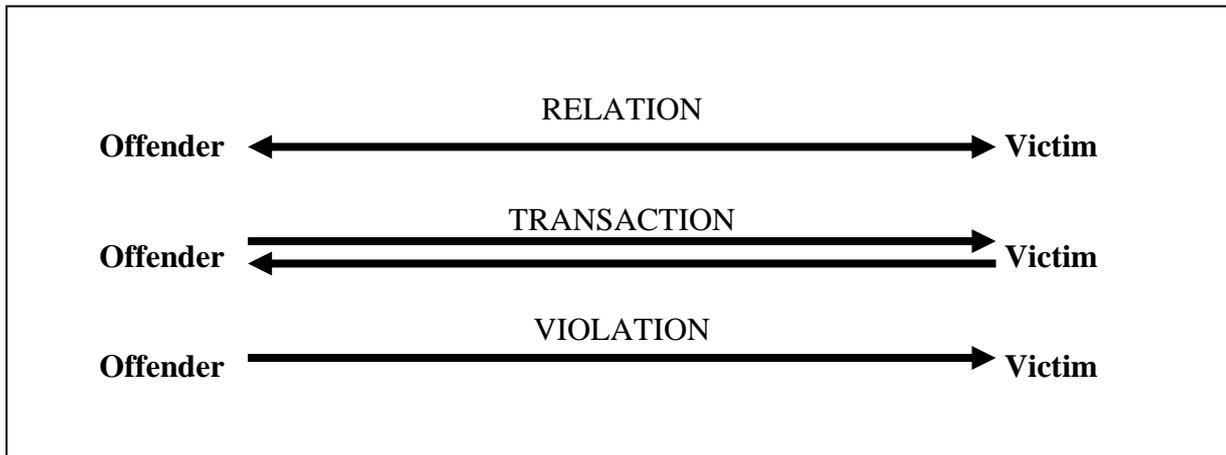


Fig.1: Three groups of online grooming offenders

The final aspect of the analysis at phase two of the research encompassed understanding the behavior of young people online via the interviews with online groomers. Despite the research not directly interviewing young people that have been harmed online, the offender interviews provided an insight to the diverse behavior of young people. It was clear from the accounts of offenders that safety messages are getting through to a resilient group of young people. However, those young people who seemed to be susceptible to the approaches of online groomers displayed a range of vulnerability features that could include: loneliness, low self-esteem, self-harming behavior, family break-up, and incidence of ongoing sexual abuse by other offenders.

A number of characteristics of the Internet was presented earlier in this paper. These characteristics proved indeed to be relevant in the interviews with offenders. Their choice of using the Internet was very much based on such characteristics.

Online groomers chose the Internet as communication channel because it facilitates socialization, it is hard to make friends in other ways, and it is easier to meet people, young people and access profiles. Interviewed offenders said that he "had met previous girlfriend online", "it allowed me to meet friends", "I was shy - it became a substitute for the youth I never had", "used the Internet as a place where I could be myself - I felt safe communicating, it was a space where I felt fine", and "used the Internet a lot since a young age to chat".

Other reasons for choosing the Internet as communication channel include the sheer number of young people available, "there are plenty of fish - you'll catch one eventually; I wasn't the type to harass to no end; when there was nothing more to do, I gave up", "sometimes they'd hang up and I'd be, I'd just forget it, just wipe their number and

carry on somewhere else", and "anyway, girls on the web, there's no shortage of them".

Motives for communication include that he "didn't want to feel alone", "bored", and "needed someone to talk to".

Interviewed online groomers used social networking sites, Coolbox, chat rooms, Wap chatrooms, Skyblog, Faceparty, MSN, Bebo, High 5, Chatavenue, Ladslads.

It seems that the Internet facilitates disinhibition, i.e. a lack of restraint manifested in several ways, including disregard for social conventions, impulsivity, and poor risk assessment. Interviewed offenders said that "people's (possible negative) reactions muted online", "easier to say some things written rather than spoken", "would type more sexually explicit conversation than if chatting on webcam", and "easier to talk to people than in real life". Also, they had "fear of rejection/embarrassment initiating encounters in the real world", "online communication didn't seem as real as offline communication", "it was easier for me to communicate in written language than sitting face to face with someone; I felt the need for personal contact but did not want to be close to anyone, therefore the Internet was perfect for me", "can talk about things online that wouldn't work offline", "didn't think he was doing anything wrong", and "it's easier to communicate on the Internet than going out - where it can be noisy with misunderstandings". "Again it's the kind of thing that you'd never say to someone face to face, even if there was a possibility of a relationship, or it was a date". "Because of the Internet you don't care. You know if you get a bad reaction it doesn't matter." "It is a lot less risky on the Internet than in the real world. Somehow, you could never manage to manipulate a child in the outside world the same way as on the Internet. It's impossible. On the Internet you can pass yourself off as a person who isn't



dangerous. You can very well say that you aren't after anything. It's easier to get a child on the Internet to trust you".

It seems that the Internet allows for overt sexual behavior, i.e. more openness on sexual issues [13]. Interviewed offenders said that "Internet facilitated 'dirty chats' that would never have happened offline", "could be more sexually open online", "extreme online conversations with other men", "had cyber sex with pedophile posing as woman", "these are adult sex sites where people look for sex", "used sites that men used to find gay sex with over 18 year olds", "sexual chat was graphic, not the sort of thing you could say face to face", "started chatting to women (normally and sexually) and then to children (normally and sexually)", "women chatted to sometimes sent him images", "chatted to women and children", "a lot of online chats with people - not all sexual", and "would type more sexually explicit conversation than if chatting on webcam".

Another reason for choice of the Internet is anonymity, since the offender can play anonymous, and so can the victim. "Didn't think anyone would find out he was having sex with 15 year old". "Hidden nature of Internet enabled conversations to escalate". "It's really easy to manipulate someone, especially from behind a PC. They don't see us. You can put any picture up and say it is you. You can invent all sorts of stories".

Yet another reason for choice of the Internet is fantasy, where some offenders "saw conversations as fantasy, not real", "online world different from offline world", and "detached self - saw conversations as fantasy, not real". One interviewed offender said that he prioritized family life over secret online life, which let him continue to have an online life.

6. DISCUSSION

Analysis of the offender accounts of their contact with young people made it clear that that online grooming cannot be comprehensively understood and managed without understanding the interaction between the offender, online environment and young person. In particular, the nature of online disinhibition and how this influences the behavior of both online groomers and young people.

Reflecting on the research project, the development of the typology represents an important contribution of this research to the literature, as it challenges some of the common grooming myths such as:

"All online groomers want to meet young people..."

"Pornography and indecent images cause online offending..."

"Young people are passive when communicating with adults..."

"All online offending involves socialization...."

In testing and challenging these assumptions, the research empowers policy makers to understand the complexity of offenders and young people's online behavior and may assist in the development of effective intervention programs [5, 6]. Consequently, the final phase of the research is underway and involves two components. The

first is a series of workshops in schools discussing online behavior and the research findings. These will be followed up by further group discussions with teachers, policy stakeholders and frontline professionals to discuss the implications of the research on effective online intervention programs.

7. CONCLUSION

The overarching aim of the European Online Grooming Project is to empower careers, teachers and young people to use the Internet safely, and provide treatment programs with a robust evidence base in which to develop effective interventions for online groomers. To this end, the first annual report set out the consortium's initial steps to achieve this aim by detailing findings from the scoping exercise. To summarize this initial work, 19 depth-interviews with professional experts across Europe, analysis of convicted online groomers police case-files, and a review of European legislative and empirical literature regarding online offending resulted in the development of hypothetical model of online grooming. The hypothetical model was set in the theoretical context of self-regulation, online disinhibition, attachment and contextual ecological models, and used to develop a topic guide of key themes to explore in the in-depth interviews with online groomers across Europe. Each of these themes was linked back to the core objective of the research, to provide robust data about online groomers to inform prevention policy and practice.

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